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AUTHOR Newkirk, Thomas
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ABSTRACT

Findings from a number of studies of the reading interests and habits of British secondary school students are reviewed, and the results of a new survey of the opinions of 55 teachers are briefly reported. The studies indicate that a number of "classic" texts are popular but that "subliterature" is also popular and becomes more so as students grow older. Narrative fiction, particularly humorous or mystery writing, is popular; poetry, though not unpopular with younger secondary school students, is disliked by the better examination students. Out-of-class reading declines after age 12. There is a tendency toward "realism" and "relevance" in literature chosen for classroom use, which some educators feel might be limiting. (Author/AA)

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Reading Habits of British Secondary Students

Thomas Newkirk
Teaching Assistant
University of Texas at
Austin

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It has been said that Britain and the United States are two countries separated by a common language. Until relatively recently there has been little exchange of ideas between British and U.S. English educators. This all began to change in the 1960's with the Dartmouth Conference and a large-scale comparative study carried out by members of the University of Illinois faculty. Unfortunately, this seemed to be the high point of mutual interest, and much of the subsequent research on English education in Britain has not found its way into U.S. publications. This short survey will look at four questions that have to do with the reading habits of British secondary students:

1. What books/authors are commonly cited by students as popular for personal reading?
2. What types of books (e.g. mystery, romance) are commonly cited as popular?
3. How much out-of-class time is spent on personal reading?
4. What books chosen for classroom use are cited by students as popular?

Student-chosen Personal Reading

In 1967, a group of U.S. observers from the University of Illinois visited 42 secondary schools in the United Kingdom which were cited as "pace-setting."[1] A group of 447 students, aged 16-18, were asked which authors they felt had the greatest influence on them. The students chose D.H. Lawrence, Shakespeare, Graham Greene, George Orwell, Thomas Hardy, T.S. Eliot, and Ernest Hemingway in that order. Graham Greene and Ian Fleming were popular in Scotland, although no English student selected Fleming. As to types of literature preferred, students ranked humorous literature first, followed by mystery and detective, adventure, science fiction, and romance. Poetry was the least popular of the twelve categories from which they chose.

The questions concerning the time spent on out-of-class reading were posed to a larger sample of 4301 students. Only 10.3% of the sample spent one hour or less/week on personal reading, and 63% spent three hours or more. The study concluded that while students in the U.S. and the United Kingdom spend about the same amount of time on out-of-class reading, United Kingdom students spend more of this time on personal reading, and U.S. students spend more on required school reading. This and the list of authors chosen as significant give a rather impressive picture of the personal reading habits of United Kingdom students. But the question remains as to whether this pattern is typical of schools that are not "pace-setting."

The National Association for the Teaching of English (the British equivalent of the NCTE) conducted a survey in the late 1960's of 2,122 students, aged 12-15, who were drawn from nine secondary schools in the county of Warwickshire (which includes Birmingham).[2] The study noted the popularity of comics. The novelist found to be most popular was Ian Fleming. Particularly popular were his novels that have been made into movies, Thunderball, Dr. No, From Russia with Love, and Goldfinger. Fleming was enjoyed by boys throughout the age range and was popular with 15-16 year-old girls. This study found that the most popular "classical" author was Charles Dickens, and the most popular children's novelist was Enid Blyton, a formula-fiction writer along the lines of Carolyn Keene, creator of Nancy Drew.

Yarlott and Harpin[3] conducted a survey of 1,000 students who were preparing for the General Certificate of Education Examinations (taken by approximately the top 30% of secondary students). These exams are given at 16 (O-level) and at 18 (A-level). Students were asked to name their three favorite authors. The ten authors most frequently mentioned and the number of mentions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Yarlott and Harpin Survey of Favorite Authors of O-level and A-level Students

Author	O-level (n=800) boys	O-level (n=800) girls	A-level (n=200) boys	A-level (n=200) girls	Total
Ian Fleming	120	42	10	3	175
D.H. Lawrence	43	52	19	31	145
Agatha Christie	48	79	2	2	131
H.G. Wells	78	56	4	4	112
Dickens	37	51	10	7	70
Orwell	27	18	18	7	70
Nevil Shute	22	41	2	4	69
John Wyndham	22	33	7	4	66
Hardy	12	25	11	13	61
Shakespeare	22	15	16	7	60

The results seem consistent with the Warwickshire study in establishing the popularity of Fleming and Dickens. The study also supports the claim made by the University of Illinois study that D.H. Lawrence has a special hold on the sensibilities of British students.

Yarlott and Harpin also attempted to determine what type of literature was popular among the students in the sample. Students were asked to select from 32 categories their three favorite types of literature. One weakness in this part of the survey was the overlap in categories (e.g. humorous writing and short story). The clear favorite among the categories was humorous writing, followed by mystery and suspense, novels with a serious theme, science fiction, and love and romance. As might be expected, science fiction was more popular with boys, and love and romance was more popular with girls. The category, novels with a serious theme, was more popular with older students. The order of reading interests is almost identical with that found by the University of

Illinois study.

The most extensive survey of reading interests in England since the war has been conducted by Whitehead et. al.[4] The authors surveyed 7,800 students drawn from 193 primary and 188 secondary schools. The sample was divided into three age groups, 10+, 12+, and 14+. The students were asked to name their favorite books and the top five titles in each age group are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Whitehead et. al. Survey of Favorite Books

10+	12+	14+
1. Black Beauty	1. Little Women	1. Little Women
2. Treasure Island	2. Black Beauty	2. Skinhead
3. The Secret Seven (Blyton)	3. Treasure Island	3. The Day of the Triffids (Wyndham)
4. Little Women	4. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe	4. Jane Eyre
5. Alice in Wonderland	5. Jane Eyre	5. Animal Farm

The results are surprising in that so many "old classics" appear on the list. The technique of having young children name their favorite book has drawn criticism on the grounds that they often do not remember the titles of books they read, and many in the sample may have given titles that are well-known and easily remembered. Nevertheless, the survey does suggest that traditional children's classics still hold their appeal.

One of the most disturbing findings of the Whitehead survey was the decline in the amount of reading done after the age of twelve. Students were asked about their out of school reading habits and the results are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Whitehead et. al. Survey of Out of Class Reading Habits

	10+	12+	14+
Non-reader	3%	6%	7%
Comic reader only	10%	23%	29%
Book reader (books per month)			
1-2 month	38%	33%	31%
3-4 month	29%	25%	21%
5 or more	20%	13%	11%

This pattern is markedly different from the pattern shown by the University of Illinois study. A number of British educators have expressed concern that 36% of the 14+ age group reads either comics or nothing at all.

The authors speculate that excessive reading of non-quality literature may turn a student off to literature. This runs somewhat counter to the common view (at least on this side of the Atlantic) that however much poor literature the student reads, he will eventually tire of it and move on to something better. There is also the concern that the quality of the newspapers that students read is often little better than that of the National Enquirer, focusing on sex (a semi-nude photo in every issue), scandal, and sappy human interest stories.

One result of the extensive research into reading interests has been a call to librarians to modify their traditional book acquisition policies. The Bullock Report, a massive government statement on the teaching of English, has argued (echoing the conclusion of the Whitehead survey) that since adolescents overwhelmingly prefer narrative fiction for outside reading, librarians should concentrate on building up a good supply of good fiction, even, the implication is, if this must be done at the expense of non-fiction.[5]

In a more informal survey of secondary reading interests, Carlsen interviewed a number of British teachers and librarians.[6] His findings parallel those of the Whitehead survey, particularly the concern that so little quality literature is read voluntarily. Carlsen writes," We found that the bulk of materials read by teenagers could be classified as sub-literature." He included in this category comics, which he found very popular, the Enid Blyton books, and a series of books which glorify the sadistic urban tough, Skinhead being the most famous (or infamous) of the series. Also popular were books in the Timothy Lea series, the best-known being Confessions of a Window Cleaner, in which Timothy's voca- give him unlimited opportunity for sexual activity. Although Carlsen does note that some quality fiction is being read, he quotes an expert on adolescent

literature who claims that books can be divided into "worthy books" and "books young people read."

Before moving to teacher-chosen literature some handicaps in book provision should be noted. The Bullock Report noted that less than half of the British secondary schools questioned for the report used the library only as a library. A surprising 19% were used for other purposes more than 50% of the time.[7] Many school librarians must double as classroom teachers. Considering the education cuts in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's current budget, it is unlikely that this situation will dramatically improve. It is common now for teachers to set up classroom libraries, but here again there are difficulties. Those in charge of scheduling classes often assume that English teachers do not need the same room for all classes (as science teachers do) and, to facilitate scheduling, can be moved around. One unintended effect of this policy is the disappearance of classroom libraries which cannot be carted around. There is also still a reluctance among some teachers to devote class time to student-chosen reading. One education inspector in Birmingham noted, with some frustration, that some teachers feared that if they were "caught" giving free reading periods, they might be accused of "not teaching."

Teacher-chosen Reading

Comparatively little work has been done on student attitudes toward teacher-chosen literature. One of the first surveys of this type was carried out by Whitehead who, in 1957, surveyed the attitudes of 1970 grammar school (i.e. students selected as more able) children, ages 12-16, toward ten novels commonly taught at the secondary level.[8] He found that among younger students Treasure Island, Prester John (Buchan), A Christmas Carol, and Kidnapped were genuinely popular. On the other hand, novels chosen for the older students, particularly Pilgrim's Progress and The Cloister and the Hearth, were so intensely disliked that Whitehead suggested that they be dropped as examination books.

The Yarlott and Harpin study[9] noted earlier also examined the attitudes of the sample toward literature chosen for examinations. Students were asked to list any book they had read for examinations which they particularly liked or disliked. The most popular title was The Long and the Short and the Tall, a relatively recent play set in the Pacific during World War II. Romeo and Juliet was very popular among 16-year-old girls as was Macbeth. Othello was distinctly popular with 18-year-old girls. Henry IV Part 1 was unpopular with 16 year-old girls and among 16 year-old boys it was both the most popular and most unpopular title. The authors point out that these likes and dislikes may well be more an indication of the quality of the teachers than of the quality of the books.

In another section of the questionnaire students were asked about their future reading interests. While only 14 of the 1000 students said that after leaving school they intended to read no novels, 224 said they never wished to read a play again, and 297 said they would never read poetry again. Indeed, only one 16-year-old in eight registered any marked interest in reading poetry or plays after leaving school. So intense was the dislike for poetry at this age that the authors suggest that it might be made an optional part of the O-level exam and the prose section expanded.

Having observed a number of O-level literature classes, I felt that the problem was not so much poetry's inherent lack of appeal, but the critical-analytic approach taken at this stage. While it would be foolish to argue that intelligent 16-year-olds should not be expected to look at a poem analytically, if this approach is pursued, as it often is, to the exclusion of other approaches (e.g. oral interpretation, choral reading, poetry writing, and reading for pleasure), the study of poetry can be tedious. As to the lack of interest in the future reading of plays, this may reflect the sensible preference of seeing plays over reading them.

As part of an investigation of teaching methods in British secondary

schools, I interviewed 55 secondary English teachers in 20 schools (10 in Birmingham, 5 in Leeds, and 5 in Manchester). These schools were chosen by education advisors in each city as "representative." The teachers were asked to name up to five pieces of literature, used in-class, that they felt students respond to favorably. While teachers perceptions of student reaction may not be entirely accurate, the responses do indicate the literature teachers are enthusiastic about. A total of 163 titles were mentioned. Those mentioned four or more times are listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Literature Students in Early Secondary School (ages 11-13) Respond to Favorably

Title	Author	# of mentions
The Silver Sword	Serraillier	16
The Hobbit	Tolkein	13
The Goalkeeper's Revenge	Naughton	10
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe	Lewis	8
Tom Sawyer	Clemens	5
Joby	Barstow	5
I Am David	Holm	4
The Family from One End Street	Garnett	4
Animal Farm	Orwell	4
"The Highwayman"	Noyes	4
Practical Cat Poems	T.S. Eliot	4

While the sample is small, it does reveal the astonishing popularity of Serraillier's The Silver Sword, a story of young children who, separated from their parents during the Nazi occupation of Poland, escape to Switzerland. The other very popular title that is not known in the US. is The Goalkeepers' Revenge, a set of stories which gives a nostalgic, though not painless, view of growing up in urban England between the wars. The choice of The Hobbit (which is usually not taught in its entirety) and The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe indicates an interest in fantasy, and both are often used as stimuli for imaginative writing. Seven of the 41 titles mentioned more than once were poems or collections of poems, most of them either humorous (Eliot's Practical Cat Poems, Poems of Edward Lear, "Jabberwocky," Spike Milligan's humorous poems)

or narrative ""The Highwayman," "Reynard the Fox"). Thus, it seems that despite the negative attitudes expressed by older students, in the earlier secondary grades teachers feel that much poetry is enjoyed by the students. With the exception of The Goalkeepers' Revenge, no short story or collection of short stories was mentioned. British teachers seem to use novel excerpts where US. teachers would use short stories. A number of teachers I spoke to felt that too much use is made of excerpts. Only one play Hobson's Choice was mentioned more than once.

The in-class reading for the better students in the upper forms (grades) is still chosen from a list compiled by examination boards. While essentially traditional (strong emphasis on Shakespeare and Chaucer) the lists now include many modern authors, Graham Greene, William Golding, and Ted Hughes being among the more popular. Classroom teachers have more latitude in choosing literature for students taking the less demanding Certificate of Secondary Education exam at age 16. There seems a tendency here to pick literature that depicts the often-harsh life of the urban working class. So pronounced is this trend that the Bullock Report has warned:

> There is an obvious place for such material but we have heard the case for "relevance" carried to the point of excluding fantasy or any stories with settings or characters unfamiliar to the students from their first hand experience. We do not accept this view.[10]

Among the best of the authors with special appeal to CSE students are Stan Barstow, Keith Waterhouse, Barry Hines, Bill Naughton, and, for better readers, Alan Sillitoe. Hines' Kes seemed to me clearly the most popular "in class" novel among older students.

Then what, as the saying goes, does the research tell us. It is a mixed picture. On the one hand it shows that a number of "classics" are genuinely popular with students and on the other that sub-literature is popular and this

popularity seems to increase as students grow older. It indicates that narrative fiction, particularly humorous or mystery writing, is popular and poetry, though not unpopular with younger secondary students, is disliked by the better examination students. It indicates that out-of-class reading declines after age 12, no doubt due to the increased freedom of adolescence, but also perhaps because the student has developed no serious commitment to reading, having read little quality literature. Finally, it shows that there is a tendency toward "realism" and "relevance" in literature chosen for classroom use which some educators feel might be limiting.

Footnotes

1. James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee, Teaching English in the United Kingdom (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969) pp. 107-111.

2. Summarized in Pat D'Arcy, Reading for Meaning (London: Hutchinson Limited, 1973) pp. 57-62.

3. G. Yarlott and W. S. Harpin, "1000 Responses to English Literature (2)," Educational Research, 13 (February, 1971), 2, pp. 87-97.

4. Frank Whitehead, A. C. Capey, and Wendy Madden, Children's Reading Interests (London: Evans/Methuen Educational, 1974).

5. A Language for Life (The Bullock Report), (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975).

6. G. Robert Carlsen, "Books and the Teenage Reader in England," English Journal, 56 (December, 1976), 9, pp. 15-18.

7. A Language for Life, p. 304.

8. Frank Whitehead, "Attitudes of Grammar School Pupils Toward Some Novels Commonly Read in Schools," British Journal of Educational Psychology, 26, 2, pp. 104-111.

9. G. Yarlott and W. S. Harpin, "1000 Responses to English Literature (1)," Educational Research, 13 (November, 1970), 1, pp. 3-11.

10. A Language for Life, p. 129.